WHILE THE RIVER WAS HIGH

The sun stood over the sacred silk-cotton tree toward the Gankwe side of the land. Across the path leading from somewhere in the back of our shelter the parasol ants, each with its strip of green many times its size, made their way toward an unknown spot where no shelter stood, and no one trod. Like a wave the wide ribbon of green rose and fell as it crossed the ridges of the pathway. In unending numbers they came, and the lizards darting in and out of the brush swerved in the direction of the shelter to avoid the marching line, so that at our feet things moved now up, now back again.

While the men were at the landing place, one of the women who was drying rice on the high flat rocks opposite our shelter paddled over in her boat, and, passing the men with a formal greeting, walked on and stopped to talk with us. She was not a young woman. Her time for childbearing was long over, her wrinkled breasts sagged almost to her waist. The cicatrized designs which once had stood out so clearly, and in her youth had been so valued, were but faintly penciled on her face and about her breasts. Had she cared, she might have reopened the cuts, might have had ashes rubbed into them to make the keloids stand out black and alive against the dark brown of her skin. But what need had a woman her age to care? What need to urge life into symbols of fertility on face and between breasts and about her navel, when her time for fruitfulness was over? Of what use to reanimate the incised scrolls between her thighs, when the legend they told in terms of reproduction was for her a dead legend?

She came toward us slowly, balancing a bottle on her head. A faded cloth covered her from waist to knee, and at her waist a bit of the kerchief necessary to the attire of the married woman, even at work, could be seen. She wore a few beads on a cord about her neck, but she had no other ornaments, for ornaments were for festive occasions, and the cloth tied about the neck and worn cape fashion was for women who had children to carry straddling their backs, and woven garters below the knee were conceits of the young.

1: Herskovits & Herskovits E-5 (1928-1929) 1934
SR8 Bush Negroes SR8
Saramacca

good humor, and looked with disfavor on the friendly conversation between us. Her bad temper, we learned later, had earned for her the name of Mother Snake, given her by a witty town servant of a lumber factor. The idea of dressing our hair apparently appealed to the woman, however, for it would certainly only be a reckless white who would offer his hair for combing to a stranger, since with hair any number of supernatural things might be done. With the proper formula, a few hairs, and the required ingredients she might fashion an *opo*, let us say. Now an opo serves many purposes, but its essential quality is that it gives its owner power over the one whose essence is captured in the form of hair, or a scrap of garment, or finger nails, or whatever else had touched the person against whom one has designs. The power of the possessor of the opo is to dominate the will of the other, and its particular attribute might be to function in love, or in a court of justice, or in matters of getting employment, or of receiving gifts. But an opo would be the least dangerous consequence, for an opo is not to be conceived of as being in the category of bad magic. There is the danger of *wisi*—a word which has the double meaning of poison and black magic—and hair, or finger nails, or the menstrual cloth of a woman, or perspiration are the very best materials for working wisi.

And so the good woman, known when she was among us as Tita, and as Mother Snake otherwise, saw that we offered no cause for alarm and added her advice to Tenye's in pointing out powers which we might acquire and use to spectacular advantage in our white country.

"Yes, you must make pina bonsu," she said, adding her approval, "and then your husband will prefer you to his other wives. But if you want to keep him all to yourself, you must let us cut *kamemba*—cicatrized designs—on you. An ingi kodjo here on each cheek to begin with," turning to Tenye and smiling.

And so it was all planned. The Indian cudgel, a euphemism for the buttocks, and procreative symbols were to be

1:Herskovits & Herskovits E-5 (1928-1929) 1934
SR8 Bush Negroes SR8
Saramacca

given to the white woman when she returned from up river, yet with it all the thighs would still need to be cicatrized.

"Then," she said, speaking of the cicatrized thighs, "then he simply won't think of any one else, because among you, you will be the only one. We who all have the kamemba must see that it looks well, but you will be the only one."

3

The boys remained with us, amusing themselves by giving us their words for the various objects about us.

The strings about their waists, which formed their only clothing, the fiber cord with the bell about Sabape's neck, the word for garter, and machete, and shoes, boxes, and water jar, and all else they could see were named. A flashlight was a diamond fire, and a collapsible chair a hammock chair, and if we showed them something they had never seen it was a *Bakra sani*—a white man's thing.

Sabape spoke little, for he was a timid child and looked sluggish. He had but few cuts on his body, while Yamati, who was about the same age, had already several fully outlined designs.

"Why have you nothing about your neck, Yamati?"

"Oh, but I have. I have cuts. You can either have an obia cut, or an *obia tetai*—a string. It is to make us live. All children have it."

"And when do they start making kamemba?"

"A long time ago they start. If it doesn't hurt too much, they cut one more, and soon one more. But if it hurts too much, they wait until . . . ," he said, finishing on the word *te* . . . in the characteristic way of the grown narrator who uses the monosyllable to intensify space and time and danger and bounty.

Yamati found so much delight in his rôle as teacher that he became stern with us and had us say the words over again and again. There was the word for firefly which pleased him not at all. "*Mi taki, mi taki-e, azoka-nyenye*—I say, I am saying . . . " ("if you would but listen," his voice

1:Herskovits & Herskovits E-5 (1928-1929) 1934
SR8 Bush Negroes SR8
Saramacca

765 head was clearest in the quiet of the early morning. A stillness so pronounced that we could feel it surrounded us at the base camp, for at Gankwe the drums had been replaced in the shrines of the gods for whom they speak, and no more guns saluted the spirit of Zimbi, or warned away the evil dead with the powder which was distasteful to ghosts. Zimbi was buried, the grave diggers had bathed [183] and put on fresh loin cloths, the village had been purified, and all was still.

512 From our shelter, watching the haze lift, we could see that the river had fallen; the tangled grasses at the bank showed fully a hand's breadth of fresh brown that had the day before been under water. With the coming of the sun things began to stir. The lizards appeared, the [231] chickens came to peck at our shoes, looking for crumbs, and boats began to make shadows across the opposite bank, as the Gankwe women in their small corials went to their fields. At the bow would be a little girl, or a yet smaller [868] boy—as young as four perhaps, for the older ones went with the men to learn a man's work—helping to take the boat up the fast water. All this went on quietly, until we espied three boats running down the rapids and pivoting about in the still water toward our landing place. As they 438 came nearer, we could see that the boats carried no load, and our host, the director of the balata-collecting station, explained that these boats were new and were being taken down river for sale.

"All the large boats come from top-side," he said. "The men take them clear around to the Marowyne River by way of the canals and there carry loads in them to the stations in the interior. The Saramacca men are fine canoemen. They like them on the Marowyne. . . . You could 439 use a large boat for your trip up river. Maybe the man will sell one."

[142] The man in charge of the little flotilla stood more than [304] six feet tall. His face was intricately cicatrized, and he carried himself with a dignity and reserve that surpassed even the way of the village chiefs.

1: Herskovits & Herskovits E-5 (1928-1929) 1934
SR8 Bush Negroes SR8
Saramacca

name which was kept secret and never spoken except in states of possession or when the obia man called on a person's spirit. For girls, Amba for a Saturday child, Affi for one born on Friday, Adjuba for Wednesday; and for the boys some of the names were Kwaku, for Monday, Yao for Thursday, Kofi for Friday, and Kwasi for Sunday. Then there was the name which the father gave, and after that any of the family who cared added a name and made the child a present.

From the day it was born until it was at least two years old a child fed at its mother's breast. For twelve moons and five more of this time the woman could not go to the hammock with a man. It was then that her husband went to the distant French shore to work or to the railhead. But after seventeen months of nursing were past, he came back.

"If a child is made before a woman gets back her menstrual flow, then it is a god. It is Kesefu. A child born feet first some call Agosu, and some Asaeng. The child born after twins we call Dosu, and twins are Hohobi. Now it is in your book. You will give those names to your children, and your sister's children. No one will know at all what names these are. No one will be able to harm them."

6

In the quarter immediately adjoining that of the Granman there was great activity. Six or seven men and boys were at work on a new house, for the youngest daughter of the family was ready for marrying, and now the men were helping her suitor to build a house for her in her village.

From the same quarter, behind a house which stood in the shade, came the laughter of young girls. We made our way past the house and saw four girls ranging in age from thirteen to sixteen seated on a log. One of these held her head back, and an older girl was bending over her. They called to us as we passed.

"We are cutting kamemba. Do you want some cuts, too?"

These were not new cuts which were being made, for with perhaps one exception, the girls were all nubile, and

1:Herskovits & Herskovits E-5 (1928-1929) 1934
SR8 Bush Negroes SR8
Saramacca

● 304 the first cuts had been made on their faces long before they reached adolescence. When a girl began her monthly visits to the house which stood alone to one side of the road, directly opposite the shrine to the great gods, then it was time for the important cuts on the thighs, and it was the old women who made the cuts. But the reopening of old cuts, like the braiding of the hair, was a task the girls did for each other with enjoyment. It was with no small pride that they talked of their ornamental cuts.

The older girl held in her hand a razor from the white man's city. It was not very sharp, and the tropical dampness had spotted it with rust. Beside her was an old calabash holding charred rice hulls which had the moment before been rubbed into a powder, and a cloth whose color was rapidly being lost in the blood which flowed from the wounds which she cut.

Before proceeding with the cutting, the older girl would look critically at the girl on whom she was working, narrowing her eyes quite in the manner of an aesthete who was evaluating each detail. Then, with a firm grip on her razor, she would take an old scar between two fingers, and cut into it. Scar after scar she reopened, as the girls talked and laughed, until when she had made perhaps ten cuts, she would stop to staunch the blood and to survey her handiwork.

[278] When the facial cuts were all open, it was time to rub the powder from the freshly charred rice hulls into the wounds.

"She will be handsome, ai-yo!" said the girl as she finished, and she dropped the smaller cloth back into another calabash which held water. With this moist cloth dipped into the black powder, she rubbed the black on the face of the seated girl. Now when the scar healed, each of the keloids would show black and prominent against the brown of the skin.

"Mine have been reopened four times," said the girl whose face had been treated, as she rose to make way for the next one. "The cuts heal fast."

1: Herskovits & Herskovits E-5 (1928-1929) 1934
SR8 Bush Negroes SR8
Saramacca

"It hurts, doesn't it?"

"*Ma kye!* It is beautiful. The men like it too much," said the girls in a chorus, laughing at the suggestion that the pain of the cuts would deter them from having them made.

Sometimes, of course, the older girl admitted, the wounds did become ugly. There was the girl from Godo, whose suitor had kept bringing her more gifts because she was growing handsomer and handsomer. She was all but ready for marrying, when one of her thighs became infected after the cuts. The wounds were so ugly that she could not even wear the tunics of the grown girl. The family was sacrificing to all the spirits of the earth, begging them to heal the wounds.

7

These days there were many visitors in the Granman's village. There was the girl the Granman had summoned to dance for his guests. She had, perhaps, that very summer got her cloths, and her reputation as the best dancer on the river had won for her a suitor who gave her many armlets and anklets. Her voice was fresh and flutelike in quality, and so fine that when she sang she placed a folded cloth over her mouth, or danced with her head low. This was the way of modesty before people, and humility before the gods.

The women said, "Her spirits dance well," when they watched her.

There was the large girl from a village down river who came almost daily. She had the body of a woman, yet she went about unclothed, and sometimes she appeared only with a string about her waist.

"She is ready for *pangi*—cloths—ai," the women said, "but her people do not want to give them to her yet."

They would not explain, however, why the attire of a grown woman was denied her. We could only conjecture about it. Perhaps she had no suitor. The man to whom she had been promised might have died. There might be other reasons.

1: Herskovits & Herskovits E-5 (1928-1929) 1934
SR8 Bush Negroes SR8
Saramacca

"Suma de, ai," he acknowledged.

6

Bayo remained in the bush, but he did not come to the city with us, though he took us into the Awka villages as captain of our boat. While at the base camp, he busied himself with making small models of traps and snares, and whatever other examples of Bush Negro work we needed to augment our collection.

He was a poor weaver, for he was no craftsman at all. But on the river he showed almost superhuman strength, and his knowledge of obia and the gods showed his potentialities for achieving what he most desired—to become an obia man. It may well be that his great kunu had planted this ambition in him. Perhaps, if he became a renowned obia man, one of the greatest on the river, he would outwit the combined power of ancestors and gods. His physical strength was such that all seemed possible to him, and his eye was quick, his curiosity unbounded. As a child of incest, a twofold member of his clan, he had certain immunities from the gods, though his line would all the more be flayed by the punishment which his parentage had earned.

"White man," he would say to us, "the next time you come, I will go with you to Africa. By then, I shall have given my wife children, and my sister's children will be grown. I want to go to Africa to learn obia."

His young brother was not strong. Bayo allowed them to cut no kamemba on the boy, who was now almost eleven, and it was clear that he would not be able to go through the Kromanti initiation, that he would have few gods.

"What will you do then, Bayo?"

God alone knew. He did not expect that even in Africa he could learn all he needed to know to help his young brother.

"Would he go with Bibifo?" we ventured, remembering that Bibifo had become Adrian.

He laughed. The white man asked many questions.

1: Herskovits & Herskovits E-5 (1928-1929) 1934
SR8 Bush Negroes SR8
Saramacca

and it was they who in dream or vision, or in a state of possession, instructed living men in the ways of yet greater and greater obia. But there were those who held that obia ranked after the greatest of the deities, that obia surpassed the power of the ancestors, for obia knew how to make "*yorka tapu*"—preventives against troublesome ghosts, and obia men could summon the dead to enter the body of a living man to make revelations.

Whatever the position of obia in the supernatural world, its place on earth was to serve man, for of all living beings, man alone knew obia.

2

What were the manifestations of obia in the life of the Bush Negro as we found them?

A black pot with its magic powers was an obia pot, the charm worn about the neck was called an obia, the medicines we gave the natives for their eyes or their cuts were called white man's obia, and their own mixture of weeds steeped in water, which stood in the burning sun gathering a green scum until it should be ready for use, was also obia. Young Yamati who had danced susa for us did not have a cord about his neck, but, he had assured us, he had obia for long life as did his partner Sabape, though his own could not be seen, since it consisted of several obia cuts made shortly after birth, which served instead of the cord. The strings about the waists of children were obias. The slight cuts to be noticed on men's arms, on thighs, below the knee, below the shoulder blades were obia cuts, too.

Nor was that all.

Bayo had said to us, "When obia comes a man does bad things. He destroys. When mine comes, it is ugly sometimes."

It was obia, too—Apanto's obia—which had stopped our phonograph, and obia again, invoked this time by Bayo, which had strengthened the spirit of the machine.

We talked about obia to an elder, a village head, from one of the down-river settlements, which was not, however,

2: Kahn D-5 (1922-1930) 1931
SR8 Bush Negroes SR8
Aucaner

142
291
304
301

A Typical Bush Negro of the Aucaner Tribe, Lower Cottica River, Dutch Guiana. Note scar tissue decoration on arm.
Photo by Klein

[Facing p. 16]

2:Kahn D-5 (1922-1930) 1931
SR8 Bush Negroes SR8
Surinaccaro

their arrival is frequently anticipated. But it is something of an exaggeration to say that this primitive telegraphy is so extensive and efficient as to spread news of the white man over "more than two thousand square miles of impassable land." Nothing of the sort happens. The sound of the drums will carry for about two or three miles, when the wind is in the right direction, and the drum call is relayed from town to town. Most often, however, they are not beaten at all for us, and we arrive unannounced.

At the landing we are met by Captain Abaisa, a splendidly built Djuka whose friendship was obtained on a previous trip. His powerful body is all cut up with ornamental scars, a form of personal decoration highly esteemed by the Bush Negroes. The custom is a direct heritage from West Africa, found in many parts of the Gold Coast, the Congo country, and Cameroons, but unknown among the Indians of the Guianas. Abaisa greets us cordially: *"You wicki bah?" "E-e ah, matti"* is the proper reply. This talkee-talkee greeting, the equivalent of "Did you wake well?" is chanted rather than spoken. The voice ascends sharply on the second word, the final word being drawn out in a high sustained tone. The reply means "Yes, friend."

Another form of greeting is *"Ah broko baka,"* or "The day breaks again"—in other words—we meet again; or *"Neetee kaba"*—"The night is finished."

If a person is met for the second time within a short interval, the proper thing to say is *"We meetee baka."* Still another greeting is *"Bala, (Sis, Da, Ma) odio, how fa you de*

2: Kahn D-5 (1922-1930) 1931
SR8 Bush Negroes SR8
Boni
Paramacca

façades of their huts are often elaborately carved. The drums 000
and other Bush Negro implements take the usual West Afri- 332
can form, but the treatment of the motifs among the Boni differs somewhat from that given by the other Bush Negro tribes. The spiral, snake, liana, and coil designs are less in evidence; the patterns are usually more angular in character than similar pieces from the Saramaccaner and Aucaner. Animal, human, and bird figures are more common in the designs of these French Guiana tribesmen, as the collection brought back for the American Museum of Natural History attests. Also, personal decoration by scar-tissue patterns seems [304] to be less in evidence among the Boni. In all other respects, however, their culture seems identical with that of the other Djukas.

The Paramacca tribe, now numbering about 500 in popula- 175
tion, was founded by one man and two women, who were 361
slaves on a plantation in the Upper Commewyne River. They escaped by way of the Tempati Creek in 1813, then travelled over the watershed to the head of the Paramacca Creek, a tributary of the Marowyne River. For a long time they built villages at the head of the Tempati Creek and later at the head of the Paramacca Creek, being afraid to go into the

2:Kahn D-5 (1922-1930) 1931
SR8 Bush Negroes SR8

164 The Djukas suffer from a number of diseases also common among white men. Yaws, a syphilis-like disease, caused by infection with *Spironema pertenue*, is frequently found among them. Individuals may be seen suffering from all three stages of it. Malaria, including the severe tropical form, is spread by the mosquitoes along the rivers. An ulcerous condition known as leishmaniasis, the result of infection by Leishman-Donovan bodies, is an ordinary occurrence, as is hookworm. The Town Negroes are occasionally infected with filariasis and schistosomyasis of the rectal type. Leprosy is present in the town of Paramaribo, but we saw none of it in the bush.

648 The Djukas do not fear to take the bahkra's medicine. The 757 gratitude of more than one mother was earned when we gave [515] her child castor oil. Of the principle of asepsis, naturally, the [304] Djukas know nothing. Their incisions for making *cutty-cutty* (ornamental scars) are septic enough to give a bacteriologist nightmares.

On one occasion, snakee-kutti, the snake protector, did not work, and a Bush Negro, who had been bitten was taken to the hospital at Moengo. His leg had gone untreated for five days and was in the serious stage of gangrene. The limb was amputated by the doctor in charge and the Djuka made an uneventful recovery. He would not have been brought to the hospital by his family if there had been anything more for the Bush Negro medicine man to do. But there was not, and they went to the bahkra as the last resort to save his life.

778 Far up the Surinam River is the sacred medicine city of 756 Dahomey (pronounced Daumay). Into its sacred precincts

2:Kahn D-5 (1922-1930) 1931
SR8 Bush Negroes SR8
Ancaner

142
291
302
304
531
301

Bush Negro Men of the Aucaner Tribe. Note scar tissue decoration on faces. Cottica River, Dutch Guiana.
Photo by Kirin

7/62

2:Kahn D-5 (1922-1930) 1931
SR8 Bush Negroes SR8

The ornate combs used by the Bush Negroes are a most direct West African heritage, being found along the Upper Guinea coast, Ashanti, Cameroons, Ivory and Gold Coasts, Dahomey, Muni, and many other regions of Africa. The wooden plates and trays are likewise found among the Ewe-speaking tribes of the West Coast.

The custom of personal decoration by the cicatrization of the skin is very common throughout many parts of Africa. Captain John Stedman remarks on this strange habit in his *Narrative of a Five Years' Expedition to Surinam:* "The Loanga Negroes distinguish themselves by puncturing or marking the skin of their sides, arms, and thighs with square, elevated figures something like dice." This custom was widespread on the Slave Coast. The scar designs varied widely according to the different tribes as well as the social position and wealth of the individual. As the Indians of South America do not practise this cicatrization, it is evident that the Bush Negroes brought it over with them from their former home.

The Bush Negro coiffure, the method of arranging the hair in plaited tufts, is found also on the Gold Coast, in Cameroons, and elsewhere in Africa. The Djuka method of weaving is similar to that of the Sudan, Gold Coast, Mandingo, Ashanti, and the Ewe. The spindle used in weaving is called by an African term, *kyekye,* a Tshi word. The woven leg band, the *sepu,* is the same as the leg bands found in Cameroons and the Upper Guinea coast in general.

The method of finding out who is responsible for the

/27 cont./

301 as the European girl wears her bracelets. On their fingers they wear a number of copper rings, sometimes doubtless up to ten; the thumb is likewise generally decorated with them.

291 /28/ As a rule the men content themselves with merely
292 a simple loincloth or belt, but if they go so far as to dress up, then they wear a broad-brimmed hat which is usually painted with various colors; around the crown they wear a wide band whose ends hang far down over the brim.

301 Around their necks they frequently wear a string of tiger's
237 teeth and the incisors and molars of wild pigs (the pakier and piengo) and of other animal species that they have caught on the hunt; they wear these same ornaments hanging from a broad band under the knee, and to them is added now and then a shell, a piece of copper, iron, lead, and so forth. Their ornaments also include parrot and West Indian raven (1) feathers and small tassels

1. Lafroe, Psittacus macao L.

made of cotton.

301 They call the last-named obias (2). Just like the women,
751
292

2. Obia, charm. The same efficacious powers as the superstition sees in amulets and talismans are seen in this.

they wear colored cloths around the neck.

304 Like almost all tropical and African peoples, they tattoo themselves. Men, women, and children undergo this operation, and although they are set upon having this as ornamentation, they nonetheless look down upon the man decorated with many tattoos just as the European does on an effeminate dandy. There are among them those whose face and body are virtually covered with the incisions, but they are looked upon with contempt by the industrious and those most developed spiritually. They say that the former are too attached to luxury and must be lazy to waste

/28 cont./

304 to much time on the desire for this kind of ostentation. When the incisions become faint through time and the growing of the skin, they are raised again by renewed carving.

/29/ Chapter XX

The Attitude toward Europeans and the Latter's Treatment of Them

461 The Bush Negroes begin to think of work when they have
313 little strong drink, powder, and lead left on hand; they leave their
439 camp and go to the work places where they are accustomed to felling trees and working these into squared timber, which they then tie together into rafts and float down the rivers in order to sell it on the plantations and at Paramaribo.

439 Some among them, especially the Saramaccaners, bring korjalen, pinda nuts (1), and groundnuts and Tonka beans (2) to

1. Arachis hypogoea L.

2. The fruit of the Dipteryx.

439 the part of the colony inhabited by Europeans; they usually exchange
648 all this for strong drink. It is to be lamented that their trade with the Whites is frequently linked with unpleasantnesses. Generally the latter treat them with contempt. This takes place all too frequently on the plantations in particular, whereby naturally fear and dissatisfaction arise among the Bush Negroes against the Whites; it is therefore not surprising that, after having been repeatedly cheated out of their fair rights, driven by suspicion and a desire for revenge, they in turn frequently try to deceive the Europeans.

In order to make clear their attitude toward the Europeans, I shall cite some proceedings which became known to me in earlier years and which even now have not completely ceased in the colony.

/08 cont./

613 624 [562] The basia are the mouthpieces of the captain, and not at all deputies having specific authority over a definite fraction of the village. There are three or four per village; in addition there are one or two women basia through whom the village head commands the work reserved for the women.

613 554 241 242 The head of the lineage possesses no religious powers over the land. The Refugee Blacks assume that the fertility of the soil depends exclusively on local divinities, to whom each one prays on his own behalf.

613 554 681 The captain, no more than the council, does not have the right to expel a member from the lineage, even for marked unworthiness. This is one of the most remarkable aspects of the legal conceptions of the Refugee Blacks, tied to the idea that a lineage represents only one single life. There again the thought of the Refugee Blacks can be regarded as the extreme opposite of the thought of the Bamiléké, with whom the head alone retains possession of the rights over the land, expulsion constituting the supreme social sanction.

881 Initiation; age classes; men's society. These African institutions seem totally unknown to the Refugee Blacks. No form of initiation of adolescents exists, and no ceremony marks collectively their entrance into social life. Circumcision and excision are not practiced. For the children, boys and girls, there are two stages: that of the first garment, which is given upon the appearance of the pubic hair, at about 12-13 years, without ceremony, and the end of education which coincides with marriage. [304] [852] [561]

561 The society of the Refugee Blacks rests however in large part on age hierarchy; strictly speaking there are no age classes involving a fixed organization, but they exist tacitly: